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SUBJECT: JOURNALISTS ORGANIZE CENSORSHIP PROTEST, KHARTOUM HAMMERS
DOWN

¶1. SUMMARY: On November 17, Sudanese authorities arrested more than 60 protesters (many of them local journalists) outside parliament in Khartoum. The demonstrators were rallying against the systematic censorship that forces papers to consult with government security personnel on the content of their newspapers on a nightly basis. In addition, the protesters were denouncing the arrest of Salah Bab Allah, a journalist who published a report last week about the outbreak of hemorrhagic fever in Kordofan. END SUMMARY.

¶2. Intentionally choosing the same day that parliament approved the electoral commission, journalists from a wide range of newspapers rallied to protest the nightly censorship that infringes upon press freedom in Khartoum. In addition, the group was denouncing the arrest of Salah Bab Allah, a journalist from the Islamist "Al-Intibaha" newspaper who published a report last week about the outbreak of hemorrhagic fever in Kordofan. Holding banners proclaiming "Give Us Our Rights," the group attempted to deliver a petition to the sitting parliament. Instead, they were rounded up by police with long sticks, herded into caged trucks, and hauled off. As of mid-day, on November 17, 63 journalists (24 women, 39 men) from different newspapers were in the process of having cases opened against them in Omdurman court.

¶3. According to Deng Goc and Amel Habbani of "Ajras al-Hurriya," a newspaper that has been instrumental in speaking out against censorship over the last several months, the protesting group was representative of an extremely wide array of Khartoum-based newspapers from across the ideological spectrum. Included amongst the protesters were journalists from "Al-Intibaha," a normally very pro-GoS newspaper, albeit with a radical Islamist twist (it often criticizes the regime for being too pro-Western) and their ideological rivals at the pro-SPLM, secular "Ajras al-Hurriya". Emboffs confirmed that Salah Bab Allah, the "Al-Intibaha" reporter who was arrested last week, has since been released and is currently with his family in Kassala. In a phone conversation, the reporter said he was surprised by his detention, especially since "the censors had approved the article the night before."

¶4. COMMENT: The noose of censorship around the necks of newspapers in Khartoum has been tightening since the beginning of 2008 and worsened after the JEM attack on Omdurman in May. Fortunately, the resolve and courage of Sudan's press corps has also increased. Beginning with the joint press conference "Ajras al-Hurriya" held with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, the Popular Congress Party, and the Sudanese Communist Party in June - and continuing with several attention-getting newspaper shut-downs from a number of publications - an effective media campaign has significantly raised the public's awareness of censorship by Sudanese authorities. However, whether the media will be successful in gaining true freedom of the press, or instead be eventually squelched or co-opted by Khartoum's iron fist, remains to be seen. As this regime relies heavily on media manipulation and censorship to craft its public image and prevent certain information from entering the public

domain, it is unlikely that the press will see any improvement in the level of censorship anytime soon. The arrest of the Al-Intibaha reporter is a perfect example, as the government was likely concerned that the information about hemorrhagic fever, which could potentially infect one million-plus sheep from Kordofan, might reach markets in the Gulf (particularly Saudi Arabia during the Hajj), thus denying Sudan an important source of revenue at a time of falling oil prices. Embassy plans to issue a statement criticizing the arrests.

FERNANDEZ